Unmasking China's Facebook Diplomacy During COVID-19 Pandemic in Africa: Analysis of User Data

Daniel Oloo Ong'ong'a

Mount Kenya University, Thika, KENYA
Department of Journalism and Mass Communication

Abstract

China's use of international social media platforms such as Facebook to spread its foreign policy around the world during the COVID-19 pandemic has sparked discussion in academia and elsewhere. As a result, this study investigates Chinese embassies' use of digital platforms in Africa by examining the content of posts on these platforms to establish dominant themes and expose African impressions of China through followers' comments through big data analysis. The results demonstrate that Chinese embassies use Facebook to criticize Western dominant notions of democracy and human rights and propagate China's democracy as superior, while Africans regard Chinese as people aiming to destabilize their governments' economies, seize their resources. There is a need to improve Chinese institutions' tactics for engaging with the digital public in order to effectively apply digital diplomacy practice in the big data sphere, as they encounter hate speech and have their messages misinterpreted.

Keywords: Africa, China, COVID-19, democracy, digital diplomacy.

1. Introduction

Social media in general, and Facebook and Twitter in particular, have become instruments for public diplomacy in recent years. Although these platforms can provide opportunities for diplomatic actors to spread their messages in order to influence their audience, these diplomatic actors have been confronted with hate speech, fake news, misinformation, and bots sponsored by the competing government, as well as politicians and local citizens who do not believe in their messages, all of which have the potential to damage their reputation in the international arena (Bjola & Pamment, 2019). Most governments are now using social media and big data as one of their strategic communication tools to propagate their soft power in other countries and as a platform for swaying public opinion (Iosifidis et al., 2016; Luqiu & Yang, 2020). This approach has changed the way public diplomacy is conducted. Instead of engaging with the public through traditional media, diplomats can now obtain an immediate response to their communications. These shifts in digital platform adoption have been achieved not only by western countries (Cornut et al., 2021; Eggeling, 2019), but also by some Asian countries, notably China. Chinese diplomats who use western-owned social media sites (Facebook and Twitter) are chastised by various quarters, who compare them to wolf-worrier diplomats, who are ready to counter contradictory information directed at their leadership (Shumba, 2021).

Correspondence: Daniel Oloo Ong'ong'a, Mount Kenya University, Department of Journalism and Mass Communication, Thika, KENYA.

Other researchers have suggested that these diplomats and their institutions lack the necessary abilities and methods to connect effectively with foreigners in this digital environment (Madrid-Morales, 2017). Furthermore, because they are accustomed to their own digital platforms, such as Weibo and WeChat, these diplomats find it difficult to fully migrate to foreign digital platforms. Most diplomatic conduct has migrated to digital platforms since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic (Sharma & Sisodia, 2022), with most of these diplomats using social media to demonstrate their power discourse by framing the disease in various frames (Mutua & Ong'ong'a, 2020; Wekesa et al., 2021). For example, China is regarded as one of the countries that has made significant contributions towards the combat of the disease. Furthermore, it supplied the majority of its resources, including facemasks, vententilators, healthcare personnel, and the COVID-19 vaccine, to most African countries on its own. To display their prowess and set an online agenda, Chinese diplomats and their global media allies, such as CGTN, highlight these donations on digital platforms (Y. Zhang & Ong'ong'a, 2021). Although most supporters of these initiatives applaud them, some see the donations as a form of facemask and vaccine diplomacy and a tactic used by China to save its image while it mishandled the spread of COVID-19 in its early stages.

The African continent has become a battleground in these narratives between China and Western countries because the great majority of these donations went to China's African allies. As a result, the goal of this study is to contribute to China-Africa relations by looking at the values and frames that Chinese diplomatic institutions in Africa represented throughout the pandemic. It examines the Facebook posts and comments as big data source of the three most active Chinese embassies in Africa to track these debates in order to unveil its Facebook diplomacy (Ittefaq, 2019; Spry, 2018).Relations between China and Africa have long been studied. The vast bulk of these studies have concentrated on Chinese soft power as it manifests itself through global hybrid media (Fearon & Rodrigues, 2019; S. Zhang & Zhang, 2018). Others have investigated its public diplomacy on Twitter (Huang & Wang, 2020), but there is still a research void on diplomatic institutions on Facebook as a big data source which this paper fills.

Furthermore, there is an information gap about how Chinese diplomats use big data and Facebook in nations like Kenya, South Sudan, and South Africa, which portrays the features of some African countries and their audiences. For example, these countries are considered democratic in Africa, but China is one of the few countries in the world that adheres to a central governance structure. All three countries are important to China, given that South Africa is a member of BRIC, an acronym for Brazil, Russia, India, and China, as developing countries that are expected to be the future's dominant suppliers of manufactured goods, services, and raw materials by 2050. South Africa and China are positioned as business-friendly countries. This is critical to ensuring that South Africa meets its domestic imperatives, which include, among other things, economic growth and development, job creation, and a general improvement in people's lives. As a result, it views its relationship with China as a partnership that is aligned with its development goals rather than a trade relationship. China, on the other hand, sees South Africa as an important partner in furthering its relations with African countries (Radebe, 2014). Kenya is an important model for China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) effort around the world, as it is implementing Standard Gauge Railway (SGR), a model intended to connect East Africa (Ong'ong'a, 2022a). In addition, this project is viewed as a vehicle for double-digit economic growth in Kenya and East Africa. Infrastructure and transport are the prerequisites for achieving the development of socio-economic growth while minimizing possible conflicts (Ong'ong'a, 2022b).

South Sudan, on the other hand, is Africa's youngest country, attracting various parties to conduct their diplomacy goals. China's long-standing principle of non-interference in the internal affairs of other states is evolving in tandem with its expanding global footprint. The most visible test case appears to be Africa, and specifically South Sudan, where Chinese measures to protect its citizens and economic interests, combined with its support for an end to the war and

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the pursuit of humanitarian goals, appear to be a calculated trial run for a more proactive global role. China's involvement in Sudan's southern region began in the late 1990s, when it formed a partnership with Khartoum to develop the country's oil industry. China's proactive approach to South Sudan appears to be a significant departure from the country's long-held policy of non-interference. In fact, despite government rhetoric implying a fixed doctrine, China's viewpoint of non-interference has evolved in tandem with its understanding of national interests and objectives. China, which has traditionally avoided foreign intervention, is attempting to play the role of peacebuilder in South Sudan, where it has unique leverage. This has herald a growing role for China in global security, but further Chinese engagement will almost certainly be tempered by self-interest, capacity constraints, and aversion to risk (Asia Report N°288, 2017).

Thus, this study adopted the conceptual framework of digital diplomacy and performed a qualitative content analysis on Facebook posts and comments from Chinese embassies in the three countries from January 2020 to December 2021. As a result, the study's findings offer a fresh perspective on how to undertake digital diplomacy, not just in Africa but globally. The caveat in this article is that the Facebook comments and responses only reflect the views of the "vocal" groups in these African countries; there are always "silent" bystanders, those who prefer other social media platforms, and the underprivileged who cannot afford the time and cost of engaging in Facebook communication. The next section includes a literature review and a brief explanation of the notion of digital diplomacy. Following that, the article identifies the research questions, outlines the methodology, and presents the findings. Finally, conclusions are reached and recommendations for future work are made.

1.1 *Perspective of China-Africa relations*

The connection between China and Africa has changed dramatically during the previous five decades. These ties were previously created during the African continent's post-independence era. The argument that China and Africa shared a similar ancestor was based on the development of civilizations that were both part of a developing world and hence faced common enemies (Femi, 2021; Ofosu & Sarpong, 2021). These countries had a history of colonial rule and cruelty perpetrated by colonists, the majority of whom were from western countries. As a result of their shared experiences, they developed a common strategic interest and a shared viewpoint on global challenges. The connection between China and Africa was born out of China's unfriendliness in foreign policy during the bipolar Cold War, and it tried to combat Moscow's rule of the non-aligned movement (Sun, 2020).

Rather than pursuing a specific goal, China's public diplomacy aims to create an enabling atmosphere for all. It takes a one-of-a-kind, overly humble approach to Africa's dynamic and ever-changing content. China's presence in Africa is the outcome of a growing relationship that culminated in the development of a foreign policy and responses to African and global dynamics (Mlambo et al., 2016). China's awareness of its disengagement from global challenges, particularly in the twenty-first century, has prompted it to shift from a low-profile status to a more active engagement with developing countries (Wei, 2020). In the late 2000s, China attempted to indicate its intentions as a growing power by demonstrating an explicit interest in public diplomacy, thereby influencing public perceptions of its foreign policy actions, using a variety of public diplomacy tactics to create its image in Africa, including the establishment of Confucius Institutes, academic exchanges, think tanks, and scholarships (Menegazzi, 2021). The participation of Chinese media in Africa is part of China's current public diplomacy strategy, which aims to promote deep economic and bilateral links (Huang et al., 2019; Madrid-Morales & Gorfinkel, 2018). It's media engagement in Africa is a reaction to active communication and the information age. Third-party narratives have not portrayed China's point of view in a favorable

light hence employing its own media platforms to engage audiences in strategically important zones (Zhang & Ong'ong'a, 2021).

China's outreach is shaped by national and continental dynamics, which could have an impact on how its engagements are received and translated. Both identities play a major role in determining the partner of interaction between states. In the 1980s and 1990s, China attempted to restore its worldwide image by strengthening its recognized political ties and involving key regions of the globe as it opened to the world. The nature of Chinese media engagement in Africa changed as these interactions evolved, with a more diverse approach. The validation platform of the Forum on China–Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) demonstrates the advanced engagement of Chinese media around the world (Ojo, 2020).

With Africa's high internet penetration, foreign governments have been forced to use social media and other digital channels to spread their influence. According to the Internet World Stat (2021), Africa has an internet penetration rate of 43.0 percent, with approximate 590.3 million people using it for various purposes. Indeed, Facebook has become a popular medium in Africa, with 255.4 million people having created accounts. Kenya, for example, has a 85.2% internet penetration rate, with 10.4 million individuals on Facebook. Furthermore, internet penetration in South Africa was 57.5% in 2020, with 89 percent of 24.6 million people having active Facebook pages. South Sudan has a 900,716 internet users with 436,600 Facebook subscribers (Africa Internet Users, 2021). These characteristics of these countries therefore offers this study opportunity to explore the concept of digital diplomacy.

2. Digital diplomacy concept

The term "digital diplomacy" was coined not long ago to describe how diplomatic actors use digital tools in their communications. When used correctly, digital platforms have the power to amplify information to a greater extent (Ong'ong'a, 2021). According to scholars of digital diplomacy, digital platforms provide diplomatic institutions and actors with a window through which they may assess their effectiveness in programs and initiatives implemented in other countries. This measurement could include the breadth and reach of their information on digital platforms, as well as the number of users who receive it. This information can help them design a new strategy for dealing with the digital audience (Manor & Segev, 2020).

Furthermore, the various mediums that digital platforms provide assist diplomatic players in framing material to target specific people in the social media sphere. These targets include the states, organizations, politicians, or other influential individuals within their country or in the foreign countries that they operate in (Bjola et al., 2019). The use of Facebook and big data source for digital diplomacy, for example, provides a venue where diplomatic actors can like, share, and even comment on a digital public's post. When diplomatic actors take the initiative to engage with the online public, they have the opportunity to build relationships with these individuals on online platforms, potentially changing their opinions towards the diplomatic actor's policies (Golan et al., 2019). According to scholars of digital diplomacy, Facebook provides a medium for relationship building, which is one of the essential pillars of diplomatic conduct. The number of comments, likes, and shares a post receives on Facebook can be used to gauge the strength of a relationship (Manor & Adiku, 2021). This means that the audience would be able to engage with the content presented, which could, in turn, meet their information needs on a specific topic. Asking inquiries or requesting clarification on specific topics relating to their needs can help to inform such engagement. Most comment sections are left open to allow diplomatic actors to track discussion trends and, as a result, evaluate their overall actions within a country.

Moreover, these platforms can be utilized to determine which postings have received a large number of comments, thus assisting diplomatic actors in crafting specific content for the

target audience. The usage of various media demonstrates that diplomatic actors continue to believe that the medium has changed but the message has not. Various media embedded on Facebook assist diplomatic actors in expanding their social media presence (Bjola & Jiang, 2015). Simply put, online presence refers to the ability of information shared on social media to reach a larger audience online. Additionally, the employment of algorithms and bots to amplify the information can help to support an online presence. Bots have been used by diplomats and diplomatic institutions to boost their online visibility through paid and sponsored advertisements and others advertise their content on digital platforms using the brands of their allies (Ong'ong'a, 2020).

Scholars believe that when diplomatic actors use digital platforms in their work, they face a range of challenges, including fake news, hostile audiences, and a lack of awareness of the messaging preferences of their digital audience (Duncombe, 2018; Kharchenko & Tykhyi, 2019). Diplomatic actors use social media to spread their values in order to establish an online global agenda to address these issues. The strategy for setting the agenda on the digital platform include posting materials on topics that are connected to and relevant to the desires of the people that live in the countries with whom they interact. They not only frequently upload information to ensure that it is widely spread on the internet, but they also assist the mainstream media in choosing this information as a news source (Manor & Crilley, 2020). In some cases, diplomatic players curate this information to meet the demands of both local and international news organizations. The aforementioned aspect of digital diplomacy provides a thorough and trustworthy framework for evaluating the efficacy of Chinese embassies in Africa's use of Facebook diplomacy.

The study asks the following main research questions in order to address the issue of Facebook diplomacy:

RQ1: What are the themes that Chinese embassies in Africa focus, and why?

RQ2: What issues do Chinese embassies in Africa's followers pay the most attention to and engage in?

RQ3: How do Africans view China in Africa, and why do they think so?

3. Methodology

Approach and procedure

This study used qualitative content analysis to investigate Chinese Facebook diplomacy. The qualitative technique entails exploring objects in their natural setting and addressing and seeking answers to how, what, and why questions employing language data (text, photos, and videos). It also analyzed data with simple frequency counts and interpreted meaning from the social media platform's data through thick descriptions and quotes. The study gathered relevant textual data from posts (1373) and comments (300) as the unit of analysis in the preparation stage, then coded and categorised them to establish primary themes. A category is a group of words with similar meanings or connotations. Analysing posts and comments offered the study a platform to investigate how China conducts Facebook diplomacy in Africa.

Choosing the case

To choose the case, the researchers used Facebook to find three Chinese embassies in Africa (Kenya, South Sudan, and South Africa). These embassies are active on social media, where they have a sizable following and routinely post news about China and Africa on their verified Facebook sites, see Table 1. Facebook provided the study with a gateway into a wealth of freely available data that can best capture and decode deep meaning within a chosen set of individuals.

Users can generate text in the Facebook environment, which provided a significant potential for content analysis.

Data gathering

After selecting the embassies, the next step was to search Kenya, South Sudan, and South Africa. To do so, study scraped historical data from January 2020 to December 2021 using CrowdTangle, a Facebook-owned tool. The data in question came in Excel files format that included timestamps, posts, comments, descriptions, and other social media metrics. CrowdTangle is a crawling tool that monitors public information from Facebook pages and groups, verified profiles, Instagram accounts, and subreddits. It excludes paid advertisements unless they started as organic, non-sponsored postings that were then "boosted" with Facebook's advertising tools. It excludes actions on private accounts or posts that are only visible to a certain number of followers. To collect the comments, the study used the export comments application.

Data analysis

This procedure required analyzing the popularity of postings with a high level of involvement (comments, likes, shares, and reshares), which helped to identify the dominant theme. Because the audience has a personal connection to a post, their responses may differ depending on how they interact with and analyze the posts. The number of likes, shares, or comments a post received was used to determine its popularity, which was important in determining the post's likely influence on its audience. Following the selection of the most commented postings, the study examined the topics, created a coding frame, and then picked the top 100 comments from dominant topic to determine Africans' perceptions of China based on the polarities of the comments. Polarity refers to the ability of a post's framing to elicit various feelings and perspectives (negative, neutral, or positive) from its readers. Positive polarity encompasses all comments that represent China as optimistic, whilst negative polarity encompasses pessimistic remarks. Comments that do not take a positive or negative stance are referred to as neutral. The study employed a word cloud to detect clusters of words with similar meanings and connotations-to identify major issues, in order to determine the commenters' perceptions of China. Word cloud has emerged as a tool for scholars who want to find patterns in a text and then deduce meaning from them. To assure the study's reliability, the study employed thick description and data triangulation, as well as inter-coder reliability. The names of commenters on postings were not included in the study due to ethical concerns. The study's shortcoming is that it's probable that the most recent comments constitute the better portion of the research because the Facebook algorithm favors them that way, and evaluating historical users' comments from the postings may be impossible.

3.1 *Findings and discussions*

Eight major themes emerged from the analysis of the posts, according to the findings of this study. The three embassies covered quite varied topics, with each Chinese embassy emphasizing a certain issue on a specific country over the others. The COVID-19 epidemic and vaccination were a common theme throughout the three countries (see Table 2).

3.2 *COVID-19 Pandemic and vaccine narratives*

The Chinese embassy in Kenya prioritized posting about COVID-19, alleging that some statements about Chinese wearing face masks were circulating on several internet platforms, and that it strongly opposes such reckless and racist remarks. Furthermore, the majority of the posts called for Chinese actions to restrict COVID-19, saying that Africans in China are not discriminated against. Some of the posts also discussed the safety of Kenyans in China, with the Chinese

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government claiming that it was doing everything necessary to keep them safe from the virus. Other posts, on the other hand, opposed to Wuhan city as the origin of COVID-19 pandemic, arguing that people should discern false from fact while running #FalsevsFact #COVID19 ("Chinese virus"/"Wuhan virus"), calling Kenyans to unite for "Together, Stronger" in the fight against the virus. Furthermore, the embassy relied on WHO statements that COVID-19 is caused by a new coronavirus that is "natural in nature." The majority of the posts from the Chinese embassy in this category were written to portray China as a country that can contain the disease while also offering donations and assistance to some 50 African "brother" countries in the form of facemasks, ventilators, medical suppliers, and anti-pandemic medical expert teams, among other things.

On the other hand, the Chinese embassy in South Africa reported on donating fresh vegetables to the South African local community and 4000 masks to the Innovation Hub Management Company during the COVID-19 lockdown, claiming that together they can win over COVID-19 under the #ChinaLovesSA. The majority of the posts from the Chinese embassy in South Africa depicted Chinese firms and local communities providing food packages and anti-pandemic supplies, claiming to help underprivileged families overcome their difficulties. Moreover, some of the posts were framed to show that China and South Africa were fighting together and that cooperation and solidarity were the most powerful weapons in the fight against COVID-19. Furthermore, posts portrayed China as readily available and prepared to assist South Africa and continue its efforts to make vaccines accessible to the global public, and emphasized the importance of supplying Chinese vaccines as long as there was a need and regulatory approval, so that the South African people could benefit as soon as possible. Additionally, the majority of posts in this category claimed that China was treating foreigners, particularly Africans, equally in anti-pandemic measures and that a united people could never be defeated. In some posts, South Africa and other BRICS countries were also portrayed as providing significant support to China during the most difficult period of battling COVID-19, and China will never forget their help and friendship.

The Chinese embassy in South Sudan, like the Chinese embassies in Kenya and South Africa, prioritized reporting on anti-epidemic measures affecting Africans in China, claiming that China and Africa are good friends, partners, and brothers through thick and thin, and that China is ready to work with Africans to defeat the virus. Additional posts depicted that China was closely monitoring the outbreak in South Sudan and firmly supports the country's efforts to prevent and control the pandemic through donations of medical protective clothing, N95 face masks, surgical face masks, medical protective goggles, surgical gloves, and nucleic acid detection reagents. Furthermore, the posts claimed that China aided South Sudan promptly and protected its legitimate rights and interests at multilateral forums such as the United Nations, and that South Sudan would win the COVID-19 battle. Additionally, posts depicted South Sudan as increasing its efforts in epidemic control, while China was eager to provide further anti-pandemic assistance to South Sudan within its capacity. Other posts in this category claim that fighting COVID-19 requires solidarity rather than slander, stating that China was not the virus's birthplace, that it did not produce the virus, conceal information, and allowed the virus to spread around the world in three months, stating that these allegations are a mix of western recipes with some local spices, and implying the need to be vigilant against unproven allegations and remarks that will not kill the virus but harm unity. Other posts framed #ChineseVaccines as giving Western countries a head start in the global immunization race.

3.3 *Economic development and trade*

Posts in this category focused on economic development, such as the China Southern airline flight ceasing operations in Kenya because of an increase in cases of the COVID-19

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epidemic. Additional posts represented invitations to the online Spring Canton Fair 2020 for domestic and foreign trade. Other posts reported on China's claim to donate $2 million to COVID-19-affected developing countries as a response to economic and social development. Furthermore, posts depicted Kenyan tea and coffee products as being live streamed on Taobao, the largest online platform, as part of the Economic and Trade Expo. According to these posts, Chinese people can now readily enjoy Kenyan tastes. Related posts proposed the launch of an African Products Online Promotion for three months to allow African businesses and retailers to engage in potential trade cooperation with Chinese counterparts, citing the US $139.1 billion in trade between China and Africa, as well as US $59.3 billion in imports from Africa.

In this category, posts from the Chinese embassy in South Africa framed South Africa's decision to join China's economic development train. Posts reported on trade between China and South Africa, claiming that it reached US $34.72 billion as of August 2021, accounting for more than a fifth of China-Africa trade. In addition, it stated that China anticipated the launch of the African Continental Free Trade Area, which would stimulate economic development and provide a larger platform for China-Africa cooperation. Furthermore, posts portrayed South African enterprises' involvement in the 2nd China-Africa economic trade and trade expo, saying that it would give a space for in-depth economic trade and collaboration in sectors such as infrastructure, health, development and agriculture between the two countries. Other posts claimed that China is dedicated to actively boosting trade and investment with South Africa, and that the new era of enhanced cooperation would bring new and exciting opportunities.

The Chinese embassy in South Sudan, on the other hand, reported on a supermarket operated by a Chinese investor in South Sudan that employs 40 South Sudanese and claims to help hundreds of people navigate the severe economic crisis brought on by the war. Additional posts characterized the Chinese debt trap as a myth as a fabrication purposefully spread by some western politicians to foment hostility between China and Africa with nefarious motives. According to these posts, China and Africa's economic cooperation is based on sincerity, results, and good faith, with an emphasis on good and shared interests, openness, equality, transparency, and mutual benefit. Furthermore, they depicted China as having built over 3,500 companies in Africa and providing a business environment conducive to the survival and growth of enterprises. Other posts discussed China's claim to extend the debt suspension period to African countries that have been severely hit by the pandemic and are in financial distress.

3.4 *Communist Party of China (CPC) values*

In this study, the Communist Party of China was identified as a thematic category. The Chinese embassy claimed that the US was attempting to blame CPC for the COVID-19 pandemic epidemic, claiming that China had not concealed the true number of affected and was spreading false information about COVID-19. Additional posts discussed how China has effectively turned itself from a poor, war-torn state to the world's second largest economy under the leadership of the CPC. Other postings depicted the Year of the Ox as a significant new beginning for the Chinese and the CPC. Overall, the majority of posts referenced the centennial of the Communist Party of China, arguing that its leadership has provided a firm political and organizational guarantee for poverty alleviation initiatives and success in the fight against corruption.

Under this category, the Chinese embassy in South Africa promoted the CPC as the road to humanity's well-being, and no country should be left behind. Posts utilized #CPC100 in the same way that the Chinese embassy in Kenya did, saying that it has gone through a beautiful course of 100 years that is a choice of the Chinese people and an inspiration to the rest of the world. Additional posts portrayed the CPC as a great and correct leader who has guided the Chinese to reclaim prosperity, abolish poverty, and give them a say in history. Furthermore, posts stated that the CPC's mission and contribution is to work for the well-being of Chinese people and to

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contribute to the creation of a global community of shared future and a better world, and that China and South Africa have developed a deep friendship based on national independence, liberation, economic development, and improving people's livelihood.

The CPC was framed as the modern history of China's independence and development in posts by the Chinese embassy in South Sudan, saying that China always implements a people-centered strategy in its collaboration with South Sudan. Other posts depicted the socialist system as when an issue develops, it is resolved through discussion. In addition, CPC posts emphasized the necessity of celebrating heroes and role models while also archiving information on all disadvantaged households for a unified national registration system. According to other posts, the CPC leader enjoys a high approval rating among Chinese people all around the world, with research suggesting that public contentment with the Chinese government has stayed consistently above 90% for many years. Furthermore, posts portrayed the CPC as readily available to play a positive role in fostering peace and stability in Africa, as well as assisting African countries in developing their own capacity for peace and stability through a stronger China-Africa community of shared future that enjoys common security.

3.5 *Human rights issues*

All three Chinese embassies in Africa prioritized portraying Xinjiang as a calm, secure region with beautiful mosques, excellent religious freedom, and a cultural mosaic of China free of concentration camps under the topic category of human rights issues. Posts also allege that anti-China forces in the West, particularly in the US, invented the concept of forced labor in the region in order to insinuate China's human rights transgressions. Other reports claimed that Xinjiang upgraded rural power networks, with isolated villages now connected to the national grid, and that the majority of Silicon Valley companies' production processes are highly automated. Additional posts argue that the US and UN declared a Uygur militant group a terrorist organization in 2002 and frame China's anti-terror measures as ethnic persecution. In addition, posts claim that allegations of genocide and concentration camps are unfounded, portraying China as a renegade nation in three words: "genocide," "camps," and "communist."

The Chinese embassy in South Africa, on the other hand, characterized police brutality against African Americans as a crime against humanity, reflecting the troubling human rights situation in the US. Other posts called for solidarity in the face of racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia, and other forms of intolerance. It's worth noting that posts asserting Tibet's development and transformation reflect China's material and spiritual human rights achievements. Furthermore, posts depicted the US as interfering in China's internal affairs and limiting its growth by using Xinjiang as a pretext. Moreover, several posts noted that some brands had allowed geopolitics to cloud their judgment, and it is regrettable that they would pay a high price and lose a significant market in China as a result. Other posts focused on the US's genocidal charges against China, alleging that Xinjiang is being used as politicized propaganda by the US administration, which should reject hypocrisy and double standards on human rights and show sympathy for its own people's suffering.

Under this category, the Chinese embassy in South Sudan focused mostly on framing the US and other western countries as interfering with China's domestic affairs. The majority of the posts claim that western media outlets, such as CNN, BBC, New York Times, Wall Street Journal, and Deutsche Welle, spread fake news, lies, and rumors about Xinjiang for political reasons, and that these outlets failed to verify their sources of information.Furthermore, posts imply that the Uyghur population in Xinjiang has steadily expanded, that people's education levels have significantly improved, and that population mobility and urbanization levels have increased over time. Other posts portrayed the Human Rights Watch study as fraudulent, citing a small group of anti-China overseas Uyghurs as the report's source.

3.6 *Belt and Road Initiative and technology*

The Chinese embassy in Kenya framed the Belt Road Initiative to encompass all technological, construction, and development in Kenya. The majority of the postings in this category stated that Lamu Port would be operational by the end of October 2021. The Standard Gauge Railway (SGR) transported over 4.42 million tons of cargo in 2020, up from 4.42 million tons in 2019. Its night activities brought families together while increasing its appeal, making Kenya a more attractive investment destination and generating more jobs for Kenyans. Other posts focused on the Nairobi expressway's construction, suggesting that it has given thousands of commuters' optimism for a traffic-free future.

Unlike the Chinese embassy in Kenya, which focused on issues related to the SGR project, the Chinese embassy in South Africa prioritized posting information about China's technological development, including the use of China's e-currency, claiming that e-CNY can be used for transportation, catering, accommodation, shopping, sightseeing, healthcare, telecommunications, and entertainment during the Beijing Winter Olympics. Additional posts portrayed Tencent technology as assisting the UN in reaching more people throughout the world by offering videoconferencing and digital dialogue platforms, asserting that China-Africa digital collaboration is at a vital moment.

On the other hand, when compared to Kenya and South Africa, the Chinese embassy in South Sudan had very few posts on BRI and technology. The posts here reported the successful completion of the experimental section of ASPHALT pavement construction for the Juba-Rumbek Road upgrading project. According to these posts, the project's successful completion provided a reference and a firm foundation for engaging in the next large-scale asphalt pavement construction project, as well as bolstering staff solidarity for the strategic project's construction. Other posts claimed Chinese assistance in building, expansion, and modernization of livelihood projects such as the Juba Teaching Hospital.

3.7 *Beijing Winter Olympics*

The majority of the posts by the Chinese embassy in Kenya about the Winter Olympics portrayed China as working relentlessly to organize a green, inclusive, open, and corruption-free winter Olympic games for the entire world. These posts further claim that all of the venues would run on renewable energy and that the events would be carbon-neutral. Additional posts asserted the stage was ready for "together for shared future" Olympics and the launch of direct broadcasting satellite to support high quality live broadcast transmission services. Other posts argued that the Olympic summit firmly opposes any attempts to politicize sports carrying a message of peace and solidarity.

The Chinese embassy in South Africa, on the other hand, concentrated on reporting on China's launch of the "spring sprout vaccination" initiative, which aims to secure inoculation for overseas Chinese and collaborate with organizers to deliver vaccines to Olympic athletes. In addition, posts stated that China was planning a spectacular ice acrobatic exhibition. Additional posts reported on 20 countries boycotting Olympic games, with a focus on the US, Australia, the UK, and Canada, arguing that the diplomatic boycott would not damage the Olympic spirit, but would rather undermine the Olympic cause. Other posts claimed that the South African Sports Confederation and Olympic Committee (SASCOC) spoke up for truth and justice in the diplomatic boycott, and that it was completely supportive of the athletes' participation regardless of political circumstances.

The majority of the postings from the Chinese embassy in South Sudan centered on China's preparations for hosting the Olympic games. Chinese athletes were portrayed as adorable pandas in these posts, inviting everyone to the event. Additional posts described the Olympics

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flame display as "Health, Joy, and Energy," stating that it was inspired by China's "first lantern," which means "everlasting faith" and depicts humanity's eternal search for light and hope. Furthermore, posts claimed to be looking forward to the participation of South Sudan in the Beijing Olympic and Paralympic. Other posts in this category argued that sports may help bring people together by fostering debate and conversation between different civilizations and cultures.

3.8 *The FOCAC as a driving force for Africa's growth*

The topical category on FOCAC dominated the posts of the three Chinese embassies in Kenya, South Sudan and South Africa, with all three emphasizing China-Africa relations, presenting them as having always developed from strength to strength and alleging that China has built over 6,000 kilometers of railways and roads. These articles propose that China-Africa collaboration has aided African industrialization. Furthermore, FOCAC was framed aiding Africa's agricultural competitiveness in the export market. Moreover, these posts claimed to commemorate a historic and one-of-a-kind occasion with African countries, insisting that China and Africa maintain a spirit of solidarity and cooperation to face diverse challenges and risks while being committed to multilateral and mutual advantages. Other posts claim that friendship between China and Africa did not develop suddenly, nor was it bestowed from on high. Rather, it has grown over time as China and Africa have supported and stood alongside one another in difficult times. Furthermore, posts argued that people's friendship is the key to good inter-state relations, and people-to-people exchanges have brought China and African countries closer together to also learn from one another while new actions will be taken by the new FOCAC to maintain the momentum. The majority of posts in this category emphasize the importance of cooperation, arguing that China aids African countries in their fight against terrorism and extremism through the China-Un Peace and Development Partnership, framing Africa as a place where terrorists and extremists of any kind should not be allowed to hide. The difference between the three embassies' postings of FOCAC messages on Facebook was that the South Africa provided questions to its audience to gauge their understanding of the forum, insisting that the winners receive a prize.

3.9 *China democracy as a "model" to African countries*

The Chinese embassy in Kenya, for example, portrayed China's democracy as one that works, as opposed to the prevailing western democracy, which is imperialistic in nature. Additional posts in this category argue that China did not replicate western democratic models but instead chose to establish its own, which has resulted in China's expanding investment outpacing western countries while involving full institutional procedures. Other posts claimed that Chinese citizens enjoy vast and tangible democratic rights, that China's use of forced labor in Xinjiang is incorrect, and that no Muslim country has publicly criticised China.Interestingly, some posts claimed that the US is obsessed with imposing its democracy on others for global hegemony, which has resulted in destruction and deaths, and urged other countries to work with China to uphold justice, reject the Cold War mentality, defend and establish *genuine* democracy, and zealously protect the legitimate and lawful rights and interests of developing economies.

The Chinese embassy in South Africa, like the Chinese mission in Kenya, presented China's democracy as an endeavor to eradicate poverty in Xinjiang and its willingness to share massive achievements and experience with Africa as a form of strategic collaboration. According to other posts, China is a highly civilized, socialist country that is affluent, strong, and democratic. Other articles claimed that no democratic system is a panacea or a silver bullet, and that the move to the US's 2021 democracy summit risks worldwide criticism and failure. Furthermore, posts asserted that China's democracy ensures everyone's right to a happy existence and a sense of

contentment, resulting in widespread support. Furthermore, posters stated that the entire democratic process involves workers negotiating pay, students recovering unpaid wages, and residents providing recommendations on draft laws, despite the fact that China has not given up on democracy. Additional posts portrayed Africans as cognizant of past colonial rulers' ongoing meddling in their domestic affairs, arguing that Iraq never possessed a weapon of mass destruction and that the terrible reality in the US is that the rich become richer while the poor stay impoverished.

The Chinese embassy in South Sudan, like those in Kenya and South Africa, focused on the topic of Chinese democracy, claiming that Chinese democracy was far superior to that of Western countries. For example, the embassy's posts claimed that political systems differ from civilization to civilization and that each has their own strengths, emphasizing that all countries should adhere to the principle of nondiscrimination, respect other democratic models, share experience, and contribute their fair share to human progress. Other posts claimed that there are many different ways to achieve democracy and that one should not be bound by a single rigid model. Other posts compared western democracy to Coca-Cola, which claims that its syrup tastes the same all across the world but denies other countries the right and freedom to pursue their respective democratic courses. The majority of the posts argued that China welcomes constructive criticism and well-intentioned criticism but rejects any form of overbearing lecture, while a small number of countries ignore international laws, flagrantly disregard international justice, disregard international public opinion, and egregiously infringe on other countries' sovereignty, turning the global village into a primal jungle where the strong prey on the weak. Overall, in this topical category, all three Chinese embassies focused on countering the 2021 US democracy summit.

3.10 *Important issues to Chinese embassies in Africa's followers (Table 3)*

The findings show that Africans are more concerned about the COVID-19 pandemic and vaccine (55.87%) than other concerns discussed on Facebook by the three Chinese embassies. In terms of country specificity, South African commenters were more willing to comment (93.8%) on information concerning the COVID-19 epidemic and vaccine than Kenyan commenters (72.5%) and South Sudanese commenters (31.1%). This result demonstrates that Africans are interested in what the Chinese embassies post on Facebook, and that commenters from South Africa are more likely to share COVID-19 pandemic and vaccine information than any other topic (84.6%).

In terms of economic development and trade issues, the findings of this study show that all the commenters of the three Chinese embassies in Africa interacted averagely (15.06%) on this issue. In contrast to both Kenya (14.9%) and South Africa (1.2%), South Sudan commenters were ready to comment (25.5%) and share (18.6%) on issues related to economic development. This means that South Sudan considers Chinese economic development and trade in their country to be more important than ever before, because South Sudan has recently attempted to be economically stable while being influenced by internal political conflicts that have hampered its progress.

It is interesting to note that, although China has invested much in BRI projects in Africa, which include railways, roads, and bridges, among others, commenters on this topical issue differed among the three countries. For instance, this issue received 5.5% of comments in Kenya, it is notable that commenters on the Chinese embassy in Kenya were more willing to share (45%) on this issue than those from South Sudan (25.2%) and South Africa (0.7%). In addition, it is surprising that comments from interaction from commenters on South Africa's Chinese embassy page were minimal compared to the other two countries.

The topical category on CPC received an average interaction among the commenters from the three Chinese embassies in Africa. The most outstanding finding from this study is that

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the commenters on the Chinese embassy in South Sudan were more willing to share (7.4%) the values of the CPC than Kenyans (2.7%) and South Africans (2.2%). This result means that although South Sudan is currently the youngest country in Africa in terms of independence, the commenters see the CPC's values as those which would support their country's political stability. On the contrary, commenters from Kenya (0.8%) and South Africa (0.7%) minimally share (3.5 and 2.2%) on CPC values. This is because these two countries are considered to be politically stable and democratic in nature, as well as a point of reference to other African countries on issues of development and stability.

Furthermore, on the issue of human rights, the commenters of the three embassies in Africa interacted on average (2.66%). These findings postulate that these commenters are concerned with human rights issues and reports about China in general. And there is a likelihood of the South Sudan commenters commenting (2.7%) and sharing (4.2%) information on human rights issues about China more than either Kenya (0.8%) or South Africa (0.9% and 1.6%), respectively. Human rights issues are a controversial topic in China, and therefore, the commenters of the Chinese embassy in South Sudan are willing to understand how China is dealing with these issues. South Sudan has been facing human rights issues in the recent past that include food shortages, displacement due to war, and arrests of politicians, among others. On the other hand, the commenters on Kenya and South Africa pay less attention to human rights issues in China, perhaps because they view China as a country that they cannot emulate in human rights terms.

The findings of this study show that, of the three commenters on Chinese embassies' Facebook posts, South Sudan commenters tend to comment on topical issues of democracy more than Kenya and South Africa commenters. It is also noted that South Sudan commenters are more likely to Like (5.1%), Comment (6.3%), and Share (3.6%) than both the commenters in Kenya and South Africa. These findings indicate that South Sudanese people are interested in the Chinese form of democracy and see this form as an alternative to the western form of democracy that they engage in. Commenters in Kenya and South Africa, on the other hand, pay less attention to comments (3.3% and 0.9%) and share (1.7% and 0.8%), respectively. This result infers that both Kenyans and South Africans view western democracy as better than the Chinese one since they have not been exposed to the Chinese form of democracy. That is a bit confusing, bearing in mind the fact that China is an authoriterian country.

The Winter Olympics received (1.83%) interaction on average among the three commenters from Kenya, South Sudan, and South Africa.This finding is important since it can be inferred that the commenetrs of these countries did not see the value of the Olympic games since none of the African countries were participating. In addition, it can also be argued that most African countries do not experience winter and snow, and therefore, there may be a lack of knowledge about winter sports and games. It is worth noting that the Chinese embassy in South Africa commenters are more likely to share (3.1%) and like (6.6%) Winter Olympic topics than Kenyans (1.7%) and South Sudanese (0.8%), respectively. This finding means that South Africa is made of different races, including Europeans and Asians, who are more interested in these posts than Kenyans and South Sudanese.

The topic of FOCAC received the least attention from the commenters of the three Chinese embassies in Africa. According to the findings, the FOCAC topical category received 1.69 percent interaction from readers on average, with Kenyan and South African commenters liking it the most (3.2% and 3.0%, respectively). Furthermore, Kenyan and South African commenters are more likely to share FOCAC topical subjects (1.7% and 2.0%, respectively) than South Sudanese commenters (0.4%). The findings show that there is a knowledge gap among commenters on Chinese embassies' Facebook posts in Africa about the significance of FOCAC as a China-Africa strategic forum.

3.11 *African perceptions of China during the COVID-19 pandemic*

The study created a word cloud using the comments left on three Chinese embassy Facebook posts in order to determine how Africans perceive China. The COVID-19 pandemic and vaccines were the most discussed issues, as seen in Table 2. As a result, the study examined the comments and presented them below in terms of the three African countries' dominant narratives regarding Chinese.

3.12 *Defending against the narrative of the Corona virus's origins and discrimination*

As shown in Figure 1, the most frequently used words in the Chinese embassy's Kenya comment area were quarantine, people, Chinese, Kenya, government, virus, and corona. These key words came as a result of a post on the embassy's page regarding some Chinese nationals seen in Kenya wearing facemasks, which sparked debates over Kenya's readiness to battle COVID-19 despite allegations of discrimination towards Kenyans and Africans in general in China. Furthermore, the post claimed that the Chinese people demand a rational and scientific approach to the Chinese community and that they vehemently oppose any irresponsible or racist remarks. As a result, the majority of the comments in this category were critical of Chinese nationals and their government in general (See Figure 1).

The commenters, for example, claimed that the Chinese embassy and its people were lecturing Kenyans in their own nation while saying that the Chinese were the creators of the Corona virus, which they framed as a "biological weapon" that Kenya couldn't handle. Others stated that they are fed up, and that China could take the SGR and leave since they will not perish because they have the money, and that this cannot be used to threaten Kenyans.

> Who gave the Chinese embassy the right to lecture Kenyans? Write to Foreign Affairs, then we will receive communication from our own government. Our grandparents were held hostages in their own country. Now this is coming to us again through the Chinese. Carry your SGR and leave. We won't die because we have your money. Don't threaten us in our country. (KE-N-1)

> You have never given Kenya any medical aid. Your people don't volunteer in anything. You don't build schools. You have zero CSR towards society yet your companies are making billions here. Just carry your SGR and go. We don't need it. (KE-N-2)

> I read your message yesterday about your information to the Ministry of Health and I noted that we're no longer a sovereign nation. This is just an extension of China province. Why give a statement when we have a government!? a very strongly worded message, quite unbecoming of a "friendly" nation. It even seems like the communique could have come from our own Statehouse. (KE-N-3)

It's worth noting that some comments attacked the Kenyan government for allowing the Chinese plane to fly into the country, fearing that the Chinese would spread the virus, despite the fact that their country owes China loans. Additional comments suggested that revolution was required, while urging other Kenyans to protest the government's decision to allow Chinese people to enter the country despite the fact that there had been no cases of COVID-19 infection. Such comments claimed that the Kenyan government had let them down by pushing the Chinese to live next door to them.

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3.13 *Framing Chinese as land "grabbers" in South Africa*

The majority of the comments, as seen in Figure 2, were critical, with a particular focus on Chinese companies owning land in Africa. Some commenters stated that they hate Chinese people while requesting that the farmland be returned to Africans. Similar to Kenya's claims, the comments suggested that China was responsible for the COVID-19 virus's origins and, as a result, was using food and other donations to blackmail and bribe Africans in order to take their resources. Some commenters also suggested that white South Africans were in solidarity with black South Africans in pressuring the South African governments to reclaim the land from the Chinese and return it to Africans. Other comments alleged that China wanted to "rule" the world as a communist country (see Figure 2).

> China again they want to finish us so that they can occupy our land. I can't ever take anything from China again. People are losing their loved ones all over the world. We are living in fear, not knowing if at some point it will be our turn. They're bribing us and trying to brainwash us into welcoming them back so that they can do business freely again as they make quite a lot of money by running big shops. Thank you for the Corona Virus, because 1.6 billion people will starve as a result of a virus China lied about. (SA-N-1)

Commenters, on the other hand, bemoaned China's apparent discrimination towards Africans. These critics portrayed the act as cruel, stating that Africans are good Samaritans and that there must be mutual respect. Other comments questioned why it was acceptable for Chinese to be racist toward others but others cannot do the same to them. They also wondered why Chinese people may own land in South Africa yet Africans can't own a flat in China. Such remarks chastised the South African government for allowing Chinese people to own land while black people struggle to do so, stating that China is profiting handsomely from the land while helping Chinese people.

> Get me right My issue here is about the ill treatment of Africans in China where not even one Chinese offered a helping hand to them. And yet you expect me to clap my hands for resources given back to their rightful owners. Blacks in China can't even own a flat. It's not that they want to, but they aren't allowed. The Chinese own farms in South Africa. Furthermore, do we have blacks owning farms in China? (SA-N-2)

3.14 *Chinese as aiding corruption in Africa*

People, fake, project, bridge, road, corruption, debt, traps, takeovers, and loans were among the most common words mentioned in the comments on the Chinese embassy in South Sudan, as shown in Figure 3. The comments came from a report about China handing over a newly constructed bridge in South Sudan during the COVID-19 pandemic. The majority of the negative comments portrayed China as corrupt, complicit in African corruption, and a risky development partner that African governments should be wary of. According to other comments, Chinese construction companies in Africa were performing unprofessional work in comparison to the quality of roads they construct in China. Others stated that China was not helping Africa, but rather robbing its resources and treating Africa as a trash can where it dumps samples or goods with poor or zero standards, ready to seize its riches (see Figure 3).

> The bitter truth is that China only supports corruption. It's a well-known secret. China is a dangerous development partner for any African state. African governments must be watchful. But the roads you build in African countries are not up to your country's standards. Let's take the example of the Juba-Rubek road, which was washed away by mere rain. Where will such an event ever happen if not thing offered by China to Africa. (SS-N-1)

> I can't believe that China will work on the eradication of corruption in its all forms. The Chinese should first solve their own corruption and extend it to third world

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> countries just like how the Americans did it. In America, corruption is a big sin, while in China, India, and African countries, to mention a few, corruption is a big deal. (SS-N-2)

Furthermore, other comments questioned the capabilities that China was delivering to Africans, arguing that these technological knowledge and skill sets were not up to par and that China ought to respect Africa and regard it as a goal rather than a means. Also, critical comments claim that Chinese corporations pollute the environment in some oil-producing states and that they mistreat local workers, as proven by recent employee protests. Moreover, commenters claimed that China-Africa preferred one side over the other, comparing it to the Americans, who are more transparent in their negotiations. Other comments suggested that South Sudan was battling a neocolonial game being played by the Chinese's so-called fake peacekeeping forces.

> Most of the trade agreements are always in China's favour. The developmental projects run by the Chinese are implemented by their engineers and companies. In the oil sector, for instance, Chinese companies don't train their African employees, and the recruitment process is always handpicked. Can you imagine Chinese companies working in the South Sudan oil sector never advertised jobs? One wonders how they get their employees. Americans are more transparent and help the poor and needy in Africa, yet China deals with the rich and those in power. China Aid is a project that assists African rich families in becoming even wealthier, as well as power-hungry African leaders in winning elections. (SS-N-3)

The findings of this study have shown that the Chinese embassies in Africa effectively use Facebook to propagate their foreign influence. As a result, these findings are consistent with previous research on Chinese diplomats' use of social media to achieve their foreign objectives (Jiang, 2017; Luqiu & Yang, 2020; Zhang & Ong'ong'a, 2021). Despite the fact that these embassies use Facebook in innovative ways, they nevertheless face obstacles such as hate speech from their audiences and negative narratives about the source of the COVID-19 outbreak. In fact, the data shows that, despite China's efforts to educate other countries on how to combat the pandemic, it continues to face negative preconceptions from African commenters. This suggests that China may experience similar issues in the future, emphasizing the necessity for the Chinese diplomatic institutions to continue informing its audience about strategies to combat the pandemic. Digital diplomacy entails listening to and engaging with the foreign public in the digital space (Simons, 2020). It is worth noticing that, of the three embassies, South Africa and South Sudan are the most likely to engage with commenters on the topic of debt traps and land grabbing. These are emotive issues in the study of China-Africa relations, with different scholars approaching the debt trap in different ways. The debt trap narrative was produced by a lack of public input in the decision to engage the Chinese in mega projects in Africa (Brautigam, 2020), with the audience assuming that Chinese initiatives promote malpractices such as corruption. These findings implies that China lacks innovation in involving all stakeholders in decision-making (Carmody et al., 2022).

South Africa, Kenya, and South Sudan are democratic countries that have been heavily affected by western ideas such as freedom of expression and accountability. Furthermore, the findings of this research reflect China's level of power struggle in advancing democratic values. Chinese embassies in Africa promote "Chinese democracy" as "superior" to those of Western countries, particularly in terms of how it dealt with the COVID-19 pandemic while Western governments failed. This means China can use its power discourse to set the narrative on platforms such as Facebook while challenging western countries' specific to the United States (Nathan & Zhang, 2022). This technique could be useful for countries like South Sudan, which is working to achieve full political, economic, and development stability. In contrast, while the Chinese embassies struggle to sell democracy to nations like Kenya and South Africa, the number of comments on the posts demonstrates how much these two countries enjoy western-style democracy.

In a digital diplomacy approach, crisis communication is crucial (McCullough, 2019). As a result, our study demonstrates that pandemic conditions have the potential to compel diplomatic players' usage of digital channels. Furthermore, Chinese embassies in Africa use Facebook for public diplomacy. The current trend in using this platform is to engage with the audience, which is an important aspect of public communication. The results therefore point towards the overall definition of digital diplomacy as an aspect of using social media platforms to communicate with the digital audience. One issue that this study has demonstrated is concerned with the overall strategy of the Chinese embassies' utilization of foreign online platforms. These platforms are less regulated and therefore might hinder China's communication as Chinese diplomatic institutions are used to more regulated government communication.

4. Conclusion

In general, this study offers a positive picture of Chinese diplomatic organizations' prospective use of Facebook as a big data source under the notion of digital diplomacy. When it comes to communication, these diplomatic institutions favour certain values over others when interacting with the digital public, implying that China's approach to Africa is not one-size-fits-all, but rather country-specific. Instead, the audience of these institutions' Facebook pages is critical to the overall engagement of China in Africa. This might affect the level of China's overall strategy in Africa as it is seen as a potential pattern with a hidden agenda either to take Africa's resources or "recolonize" its people. Such assumptions from the readers of posts of these embassies affect their opinion towards China, hence looking at China as a negative influence on Africa as a whole as compared to western countries like the US.

Furthermore, the findings of this study contradict the prevalent image of China's strong influence on the continent and the generally positive view it receives from African countries, as reported in the news and in public opinion surveys such as Afrobarometer and the African Youth Survey (Sheehy & Asunka, 2021; Ichikowitz Family Foundation, 2022). The COVID-19 pandemic has provided an excellent case study for demonstrating China's digital diplomacy under the big data concept. Scholars argue that diplomacy works best during crises, which may explain why COVID-19 produced such disparities in findings. These disparities warrant further investigation into the differences in perceptions of China among social media users and offline audiences.

Commenters on Chinese embassy Facebook posts maintain that Chinese people are somehow unfriendly toward Africans (Castillo, 2020; Castillo & Amoah, 2020). These trajectories should serve as a wake-up call to China's government and diplomatic institutions, prompting them to respond to the claims. Future research into the subject of Africans being discriminated against in China could be conducted through surveys and interviews. Although this research was undertaken on Facebook as a. big data source to offer us a glimpse of the Chinese embassies' digital diplomacy techniques, it will be fascinating to see if future research on other digital spaces, such as Twitter and perhaps WhatsApp, yields the same results, and if so, why.

Overall, this study suggests that Chinese diplomatic organizations and persons in charge of social media accounts, particularly on Facebook, be trained in how to handle public comments. Furthermore, these embassies should engage an outside expert to handle their external communication, as the majority of their responses to commenters on posts go unanswered or misinterpreted. As a result of the training, these diplomatic institutions might be able to effectively use the concept of digital diplomacy, in which listening to and engaging with the audience and curating their information to arouse interest from the audience, and thus the possibility of influencing them, which is essential and the main goal of public diplomacy.

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Acknowledgements

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Appendix

Table 1. Chinese embassies Facebook activities

Embassy name	Total interaction	Interaction rate	Aver post per day	Page followers
Kenya	49,509	0.16%	2.62	24,169
South Sudan	12,717	0.53%	0.95	4,963
South Africa	12,151	0.20%	1.36	7,288
Average Total	24,792.33	0.29%	1.65	12,140

Table 2. Topical categories prioritized by Chinese embassies 2020-2021

Embassies	Kenya		South Sudan		South Africa		Total	
Topical category	Frequency	Percentage(%)	Frequency	Percentage(%)	Frequency	Percentage(%)	Total (Freq)	Total (%)
COVID-19 Pandemic and vaccine	342	41	183	30	174	47	699	39
Economic development and trade	113	14	159	26	48	13	320	18
Communist Part of China (CPC)	66	8	79	13	37	10	182	10
Human rights issues	99	12	38	6	26	7	163	9
BRInitiative and technology	82	10	59	10	18	5	159	9
Winter Olympics	77	9	18	3	31	8	126	7
FOCAC	39	5	14	2	14	4	67	4
Democracy	18	2	54	9	23	6	95	5
Total	836	100	604	100	371	100	1811	100

Table 3. Africans engagement with topical category of posts 2020-2021

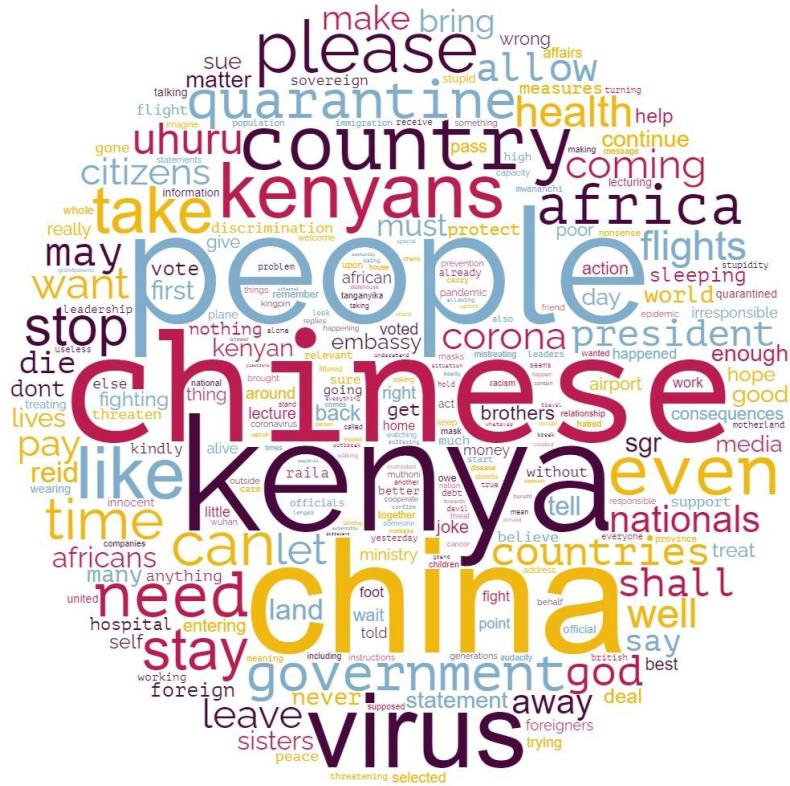| Embassies	Kenya						South Sudan						South Africa							
Topical category	Likes		Comments		Shares		Likes		Comments		Shares		Likes		Comments		Shares		Total	
	Freq	%	Freq	%	Freq	%	Freq	%	Freq	%	Freq	%	Freq	%	Freq	%	Freq	%	Total (Freq)	Total (%)
COVID-19 Pandemic and vaccine	5717	52.8	7018	72.5	1224	34.1	2535	35.8	603	31.1	477	40.8	1350	64.0	2788	93.8	832	84.6	22544	55.87
Economic development and trade	1275	11.8	1447	14.9	329	9.2	2003	28.3	486	25.0	218	18.6	234	11.1	37	1.2	48	4.9	6077	15.06
Communist Part of China (CPC)	398	3.7	213	2.2	127	3.5	794	11.2	256	13.2	86	7.4	126	6.0	21	0.7	22	2.2	2043	5.06
Human rights issues	389	3.6	82	0.8	97	2.7	289	4.1	53	2.7	49	4.2	73	3.5	26	0.9	16	1.6	1074	2.66
BRI and technology	2225	20.6	531	5.5	1618	45.0	910	12.9	365	18.8	295	25.2	47	2.2	8	0.3	7	0.7	6006	14.88
Winter Olympics	298	2.8	19	0.2	77	2.1	126	1.8	20	1.0	9	0.8	139	6.6	20	0.7	30	3.1	738	1.83
FOCAC	345	3.2	52	0.5	60	1.7	56	0.8	37	1.9	5	0.4	64	3.0	44	1.5	20	2.0	683	1.69
Democracy	179	1.7	322	3.3	61	1.7	361	5.1	122	6.3	30	2.6	76	3.6	27	0.9	8	0.8	1186	2.94
Total	10826	100	9684	100	3593	100	7074	100	1942	100	1169	100	2109	100	2971	100	983	100	40351	100

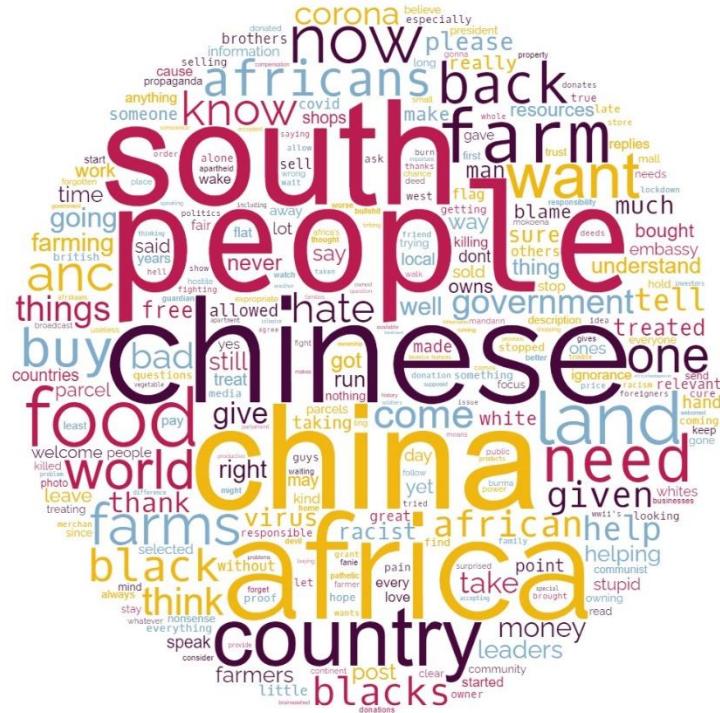Figure 1. Word Cloud-Analysis of comments from the Chinese embassy Kenya

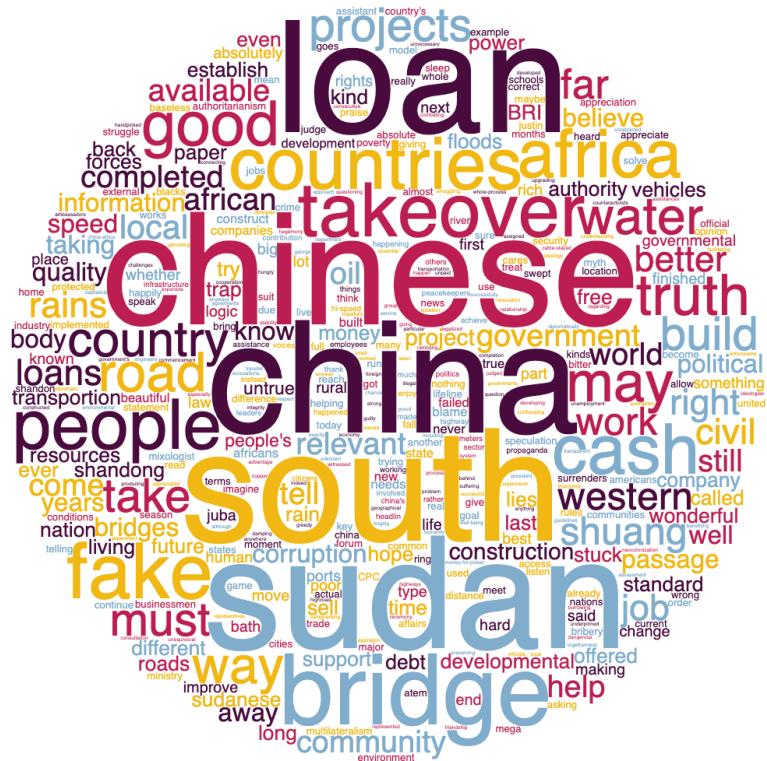Figure 2. Word Cloud- Analysis of comments from the Chinese embassy South Africa

Figure 3. Word Cloud- Analysis of comments from the Chinese embassy South Sudan

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